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(54) Title: A SYSTEM FOR MATCHING A SERVICE PROVIDER WITH A SERVICE USER

(57) Abstract: A system for matching a service provider offering to perform a specified service with a user requesting performance of a related service. Matching is based on comparing a user service request with a service provider profile identifying the services offered by the service provider. Matched service providers receive notification of the user service request. If interested, the matched service provider bids on the requested service. The user reviews a listing of bids and identifies any interesting bids in order to receive contact information. The user has the option of contacting bidders directly for more information before selecting a bidder to perform the requested service. A performance rating, provided by the user after the service is completed, is used to update the performance rating in the corresponding service provider profile.

A SYSTEM FOR MATCHING A SERVICE PROVIDER WITH A SERVICE USER

Field of the Invention

The invention relates generally to systems for matching service providers with service users over a network, and for enabling service users to select a matched service provider to perform a service.

Background of the Invention

Many businesses today have developed and maintain Web sites where users of the World Wide Web section of the Internet visit to purchase products and services. Remotely located businesses are thus able to reach a large number of potential customers worldwide. Browser software installed on a user's computer system enables a potential customer to visit Web sites and conduct business transactions with the remotely located companies regardless of the time of day or the location of the potential customer.

Because of the time and effort involved in browsing Web sites and Web pages, customers may fail to find businesses offering services that meet their needs. As the potential customer explores several levels and sub-levels of Web pages, the services offered by the business may be overlooked or missed altogether. Consequently, a disadvantage of conventional systems is that businesses may lose opportunities to sell their services, and users may lose opportunities to select the best available service provider.

Another disadvantage of conventional systems is that they fail to provide credible information regarding the reputation of service providers. Thus, many potential customers avoid purchasing services over the Internet.

Summary of the Invention

The invention relates to a method and system for matching a service provider with a service user. According to one embodiment, the method includes receiving a user service request and matching a service provider with the service request. In a further aspect, the system sends the service request to the matched service provider. If the matched service provider elects to be identified to the service user, the system identifies the matched service provider to the user. According to a further feature, the system facilitates a mechanism for service users to provide on-line feedback/performance evaluations of service providers.

In another embodiment, the system includes mechanisms for enabling the user to select an identified service provider. Optionally, the user can review the candidate service providers' performance evaluations prior to selecting a service provider.

In a further embodiment, the system determines a plurality of matched service providers who elect to be identified to a service user, and provides the user with a most highly recommended service provider from the plurality of service providers. Optionally, the system employs predetermined criteria for rating the service providers and for providing the identity of the most highly recommended service provider to the user. According to one embodiment, the predetermined criteria include a provider performance rating. According to other embodiments, the criteria include such factors as a performance rating threshold, a price threshold, a required service date and/or a relevancy threshold.

In one preferred embodiment, the system for matching a service provider with a service user includes a receiver, a matcher, a director, a designator and a responder. The matcher matches a user service request received at the receiver with a service provider. The director forwards the user service request to the matched service provider. In response to the designator

determining that the matched service provider elects to be identified, the responder provides identification of the matched service provider to the user.

According to a further feature, the matcher matches the user service request with a plurality of service providers, the director forwards the service request to each of the matched service providers and the designator determines whether each of the matched service providers elects to be identified to the user. Optionally, the system includes a priortizer, which determines a most highly recommended service provider. In another embodiment, the system includes a selector, which chooses one of the matched service providers to perform the service corresponding to the user service request.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The subject matter regarded as the invention is particularly pointed out and distinctly claimed in the concluding portion of the specification. However, the invention, both as to organization and methods of practice, may best understood by referring to the following illustrative description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 is a diagram of an embodiment of a computer system adapted for matching service providers to service users in accord with features of the invention;

Fig. 2 is a logical block diagram of a server computer according to one embodiment of the invention;

Fig. 3 is a flowchart representation of an illustrative method for matching service providers with service users according to one embodiment of the invention;

Fig. 4 is a flowchart representation of an embodiment of an illustrative process for posting the user service requests depicted in Fig. 3;

Fig. 5 is an embodiment of a user service request form downloaded from the server of Fig. 1, and as displayed by an illustrative user computer;

Fig. 6 is a flowchart representation of a process, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention, for matching a service provider with a user service request;

Fig. 7 is a flowchart representation of a process, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention, for enabling a service provider to submit a bid on a user service request;

Fig. 8 is a flowchart representation of a process, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention, for enabling a service user to select one of the bidding service providers; and

Fig. 9 is an embodiment of a Web page, downloaded from the server of Fig. 1, displayed by an illustrative user computer, and providing a listing of service providers bidding on a particular service request.

Description of the Invention

As detailed below, the invention is generally directed to a system for matching a service provider with a service user. More specifically, according to one embodiment, the system of the invention includes a server computer in communication with a digital network. The digital network may be for example, the Internet or any network that supports devices such as WebTV™ terminals, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and the like. By way of another example, the digital network may support instant messenger tools such as ICQ and Yahoo! Messenger® which serve as a platform from which user to user applications can be launched for real-time communications.

In one embodiment, the server computer maintains a database of profiles for client service providers. The client service providers may be for example, medical doctors, dentists, lawyers, real estate agents, plumbers, electricians, contractors, temporary employment agencies, and the like. Illustratively, service users communicate with the server computer over the digital network by way of a network interface, such as a dial up modem, cable modem, satellite connection, fiber optic connection, wireless connection or the like. The service users transmit service requests to the server computer over the digital network. The server computer matches each of the service requests with one or more service providers in the database, and notifies the service providers of the matched service request. According to a further feature, the invention enables service providers to elect whether to be identified to the service user. In response to the matched service provider electing to be identified, the server computer forwards the names and associated profile information of the matched service providers to the service user.

Fig. 1 depicts a system for matching a service provider with a service user according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention. Although, for clarity, the invention is depicted as a single server computer 12 servicing a single user computer 10a and service provider computers

10(b-n), the invention can accommodate any number of server, user and service provider computers. Alternatively, the invention can accommodate a distributed environment such that the logical components of the computers 10(a-n) and 12 are resident on a series of distributed computing systems. As shown in Fig. 1, the user computer 10a operated by a user and the service provider computers 10(b-n), each operated by a service provider, communicate with the server computer 12 over a network 14. A business or an Internet Service Provider (ISP) typically operates and maintains the server computer 12. The computers 10(a-n) and server 12 can be, for example, any personal computer, workstation, terminal, WebTV™ terminal, PDA or instant messenger device. In the illustrative embodiment, each of the illustrative computer systems 10(a-n) and 12 includes a processor 16 for controlling operation of the computer, a memory 18 for storing data and software, a display monitor 20, a keyboard 22, a mouse 24 and a modem 26. A browser application (e.g., Netscape Navigator™ or Microsoft Internet Explorer™) stored in the memory 28 is used to download Web pages from the server computer 12 to the computers 10(a-n) and to transmit information entered via the keyboard 22 and mouse 24 back to the server computer 12. The downloaded Web pages contain text and graphics that are displayed on the monitor 20.

The server system 12 transmits Web pages stored in its memory 28 through the network 14 to the user computer 10a for display on the user monitor 20. The user creates a user service request (USR) on one such Web page and transmits it to the server system 12 through the network 14. The server computer 12 transmits the USR to service providers offering related services (i.e., matched service providers (MSPs)) over the network 14 by way of the computers 10(b-n). The MSPs review the USR at their computers and, at their discretion, transmit bids for the corresponding service through the network 14 to the server computer 12. Bids received at the server computer 12 are transmitted through the network 14 to the user computer 10a. The user

can then review the bids and select a responding MSP (i.e., a bidder) to perform the requested service. After receiving the selection, the server computer 12 transmits the bidder's contact information (e.g., an e-mail address and a telephone number) to the user's computer 10a. Optionally, the user can decline employing any of the responding service providers.

Fig. 2 depicts a logical block diagram of an illustrative embodiment of the server computer 12 of Fig. 1. A receiver 30 receives a USR from a user computer, by way of example, 10a. A matcher 32 obtains the USR from the receiver 30 and matches the USR with a service provider. After matching is completed, a director 34 forwards the USR to the MSP. A designator 36 determines whether the MSP elects to bid on the USR. In response to the MSP electing to be identified, responder 38 identifies the MSP to the user. According to one embodiment, the matcher 32, the director 34 and the designator 36 are implemented in a microprocessor in the server computer 12. Alternatively, those components can be implemented entirely in hardware, or by way of a combination of hardware and software.

Fig. 3 depicts a method for matching a service provider to a user requesting a service, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention. As shown in step 40, the illustrative system posts or submits the USR for review. The server computer matches the USR to service providers offering related services and the resulting MSPs are notified of the new USR (step 44). Each of the MSPs reviews the USR and places a bid if it is interested in providing the requested service (step 48). The server forwards the bids to the user and the user selects a bidder to perform the requested service (step 52).

Fig. 4 shows a flowchart describing in more detail an embodiment of step 40 (shown in Fig. 3) of posting a USR. The user generates a USR for a desired service (step 60) by entering information in a USR form displayed on the user monitor 20a. Optionally, the USR form is customized according to the service category requested by the user. The server computer 12

posts the USR (step 70) and provides confirmation of posting to the user (step 72), if the user has an existing account (step 62). If the user does not have a valid account, the server computer 12 prompts the user to open an account (step 64). The server computer 12 obtains personal contact data (e.g., name, postal address, e-mail address, telephone number and the like) when opening the account. Optionally, the server computer 12 also obtains demographic data which it stores as a user profile. The server computer 12 provides the user with confirmation of a valid account subsequent to receiving the required information (step 66). According to the illustrative embodiment, the user creates a user profile by indicating, selecting or otherwise entering service categories of general interest (step 68). In one embodiment, the server 12 generates a dynamic USR from the original USR by modifying or adding information based on the service provider profiles (SPPs) of the service providers that browsed or bidded on the USR. The server computer 12 posts the USR (or dynamic USR) (step 70) and transmits confirmation of posting to the user (step 72).

Fig. 5 shows an exemplary Web page 70 displayed on the user monitor 20a. The Web page 70 prompts the user for information employed to generate the USR. The user enters a personal identification code and associated password 72 for account validation. Optionally, the user provides a title 74 as a descriptive reference to the USR. The server 12 prompts the user to enter service description data 76 describing the requested service and to provide the MSPs with information that is important to the user in evaluating the bids. According to the illustrative embodiment, the user provides description data by way of categories from pull-down menus, and also by free-format text entry to describe the requested service. Optionally, the user attaches electronic documents (e.g., text or graphics files) by entering the document name and selecting the graphical ATTACH button 78.

According to a further option, the user enters limitation data 80 to define acceptable ranges for various elements of the service provider bids. For example, in one preferred embodiment, the user enters a maximum price to be paid for the service, the geographical area of candidate service providers, the length of time during which bids can be entered and/or the method to be used for awarding the bid. According to a further embodiment, other limitation data (not shown) optionally includes start and end dates for performance, preferred service dates, a service provider rating threshold (i.e., minimum) and/or a relevancy threshold (i.e., minimum). The service provider rating is a numerical value assigned to a particular service provider. The rating is based upon performance evaluations provided by other users of that service provider. The relevancy rating is a numerical value assigned to a particular service provider, based upon how closely the qualifications of the service provider match the requirements in the USR and on the number of services performed by the service provider in the service category.

At any time during entry of the data on the USR Web page 70, the user has the option of editing data by retyping the data in its respective field. Alternatively, the user can clear all fields by selecting the graphical CLEAR FORM button 82 and reenter the necessary data. To post the USR, the user selects the graphical SUBMIT FORM button 84 after completing data entry. After submission, the server downloads a confirmation page for display on the monitor 20a informing the user that the USR ahs been posted.

Fig. 6 shows a flowchart describing in more detail an embodiment of step 44 (shown in Fig. 3) of determining matched service providers. After posting the USR, the server 12 determines all service providers with matching skills (step 90). In the illustrative embodiment, matching is based on common service categories specified in the USR, along with information in SPPs. By way of example, a USR requesting fabrication of custom cabinets, illustratively, may be matched to service providers offering cabinet-making as a service. Optionally, the matching

may include related service categories such that service providers offering carpentry, furniture making and/or woodworking skills are also matched to the USR. Narrower matching is possible using limitation data provided in the USR (step 92). The MSPs are notified by the server computer 12 of the matched USR (i.e., potential customer) using e-mail (step 94). The e-mail includes service description data 76 and limitation data 80 (see Fig. 5). Optionally, each MSP is also notified by the server computer 12 of the matched USR by viewing a report of the USR on its custom Web page. Alternatively, the service provider may browse through the USRs in a service category to look for interesting USRs and place bids. Optionally, the service provider may enter search terms to identify interesting USRs.

An SPP is created by each service provider in order to bid on USRs. An SPP contains at least one category of services offered by the service provider, an e-mail address for notification of matching USRs and at least one acceptable means of payment. It can also contain resumes, educational information, association memberships and examples of work. Optionally, the server computer 12 generates a dynamic SPP from the original SPP by modifying or adding information based on the previous activities of the service provider on the Web site.

Fig. 7 shows a flowchart describing in more detail one embodiment of the step 48 (shown in Fig. 3) of bidding on a USR. An MSP reviews the USR by selecting a link to the USR on the server Web site after receiving e-mail notification of a USR. The MSP has the option to bid on the USR (step 102). The MSP reviews another USR (step 100) or leaves the Web site if no bid is placed, otherwise the MSP continues by placing a bid (step 104). Preferably, bids include a price or cost for performing the service, a description of the service to be provided (including, at the bidder's option, a description of advantages over other MSPs), the bidder's availability for performing the service and acceptable methods of payment. A confirmation page downloaded by

the server 12 is displayed on the monitor 20(b-n) after the data entered by the MSP has been successfully received at the server 12 (step 106).

According to one embodiment, MSPs have only one chance to bid, prior to the server computer 12 passing the bids to the users. However, in other embodiments, the bidding process is interactive in nature. In one such embodiment, the server computer 12 forwards all of the MSP bids to each of the MSP bidders, thus providing an opportunity for the MSP bidders to modify their bids in response to bids entered by other MSPs. According to a further embodiment, the server computer 12 terminates bidding after a preset number of iterations. In an alternative embodiment, the server computer 12 terminates bidding following the elapse of a preset time.

Fig. 8 shows a flowchart describing in more detail one embodiment of the step 52 (shown in Fig. 3) of selecting a bid. The server 12 notifies the user at the close of the bidding period (step 112) and the user reviews a list of active bids to decide whether to accept any of the active bids (step 114).

Fig. 9 shows an exemplary Web page 130 displayed on the user monitor 20a showing an embodiment of an active bidder listing page. The Web page 130 includes the name 148, relevancy rating 132, service provider rating 134, the number of prior users rating the service provider 136 proposed performance dates 138 and 140, and an estimated service price 142 for each bidder. Each name button (148, underlined) provides a link to the bid page of the associated bidder. The bid page (not shown) includes the bidder's name, location, and acceptable methods of payment. Each listed bidder has a corresponding QUALIFICATION button (144, underlined) on the Web page for accessing documents describing the skills of the bidder. Documents include resumes and samples of the bidder's work. For example, a bidder offering writing skills can provide writing samples of work performed for past customers. A

checkbox 146 is provided by the server 12 on the Web page for each bidder if the bidding period has ended. The user selects the checkboxes 146 of interesting bidders to receive contact information (e.g. telephone numbers and e-mail addresses).

Referring back to Fig. 8, the user can decline to accept any of the bids (step 114). For example, the user may determine that the service descriptions in the bids are substantially different than what the user anticipated. The user can then post a new USR using a modified description from the original USR (step 116) or choose to exit the web site. To continue the selection process, the user selects a bid of interest (step 114), receives the corresponding contact information (step 118) and communicates directly with corresponding bidder (step 120) in order to gather any additional information necessary to determine whether to employ the bidder's services (step 122). The user is free to contact additional bidders before requesting performance of the service by a bidder (step 124). Optionally, the user requests performance of the service by a bidder, without communicating with any bidders. After the service is completed (step 126), optionally, the user rates the performance of the service (step 128). The user rating is used by the server 12 to update the service provider rating displayed to other users.

It will thus be seen that the invention provides a unique system for matching a service provider with a service user. Since certain changes may be made in the above constructions and the described methods without departing from the scope of the invention, it is intended that all matter contained in the above description and shown in the accompanying drawings be interpreted as illustrative.

We claim:

Claims

1. A method of matching a service provider to a user, comprising,

receiving a user service request from an associated user,

generating matched service provider by matching a service provider with said user service request, and

providing said user service request to said matched service provider.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising identifying said matched service provider to said associated user in response to said matched service provider electing to be identified to said associated user.

3. The method of claim 1 further comprising enabling said associated user to select said matched service provider.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein said step of matching said service provider with said user service request further comprises determining service providers currently responding to related user service requests.

5. The method of claim 1 further comprising, matching a plurality of service providers with said user service request.

6. The method of claim 5 further comprising, determining a plurality of matched service providers that elect to be identified to said user service request,

selecting a first service provider from said plurality of matched service providers according to one or more predetermined criteria, and

identifying said first service provider to said associated user.

7. The method of claim 6 further comprising, enabling a user, who has employed a service provider to provide a performance rating for said service provider, and employing said rating in said one or more predetermined criteria.

8. The method of claim 6 further comprising, enabling said associated user to provide a service provider rating threshold, and employing said service provider rating threshold in one of said one or more predetermined criteria.

9. The method of claim 6 further comprising, enabling said associated user to provide a price threshold, and employing said price threshold in said one or more predetermined criteria.

10. The method of claim 6 further comprising, enabling said associated user to provide a required service date, and employing said required service date in said one or more predetermined criteria.

11. The method of claim 6 further comprising, enabling said associated user to provide a relevancy threshold, and employing said relevancy threshold in said one or more predetermined criteria.

12. The method of claim 2 further comprising, enabling said associated user to select said matched service provider in response to a qualification of said matched service provider.

13. The method of claim 5 further comprising, identifying a predetermined number of said plurality of matched service providers to said associated user.

14. The method of claim 2 further comprising, enabling users who have employed a service provider to provide a performance rating for said service provider.

15. The method of claim 1 further comprising, generating a service provider profile and matching said service provider to said associated user, at least in part, by comparing said service provider profile with said user service request.

16. The method of claim 15 further comprising, generating a dynamic service provider profile and matching said service provider to said associated user, at least in part, by comparing said service provider profile with said user service request.

17. The method of claim 1 further comprising, enabling said associated user to generate a user service request.

18. The method of claim 17 further comprising, enabling said associated user to generate a service category request.

19. The method of claim 17 further comprising, enabling said associated user to generate a customized service category request in response to a selected service category.

20. The method of claim 18 further comprising generating a dynamic user service request for said associated user, at least in part, in response to said service category request.

21. A method of matching a service provider with a user, comprising,

receiving a plurality of user service requests, wherein each of said user service requests is from an associated one of a plurality of users,

providing said plurality of user service requests to a service provider, and

enabling said service provider to select at least one of said plurality of user service requests.

22. The method of claim 21 further comprising and identifying said service provider to those of said plurality of users associated with said at least one of said user service requests in response to said selection.

23. A system for matching a service provider with a user comprising,

a receiver adapted for receiving a user service request,

a matcher adapted for receiving said user service request from said receiver and for matching said user service request with a matched service provider, and

a director adapted for forwarding said user service request to said matched service provider.

24. The system of claim 23 further comprising a designator adapted for determining whether said matched service provider elects to be identified to said user.

25. The system of claim 24 further comprising a responder adapted for identifying said matched service provider to said user in response to said matched service provider electing to be identified.

26. The system of claim 23 wherein said matcher is further adapted for matching said user service request to a plurality of matched service providers, said director is further adapted for forwarding said user service request to each of said plurality of matched service providers, and said designator is further adapted for determining whether each of said plurality of matched service providers elects to be identified to said user.

27. The system of claim 26 further comprising, a prioritizer adapted for determining a first service provider from said plurality of matched service providers according to one or more predetermined criteria.

28. The system of claim 23 further comprising, a selector adapted for choosing said matched service provider for performing a service corresponding to said user service request.

29. A system for matching a service provider to a user comprising,

means for receiving a user service request,

means for determining a matched service provider by matching said user service request with a service provider,

means for forwarding said user service request to said matched service provider, and

means for determining if said matched service provider elects to be identified to said user.

30. The system of claim 29 further comprising means for identifying said matched service provider to said user if said matched service provider elects to be identified.

31. An automated system for matching a service provider to a user over a digital communications network comprising,

a receiver adapted for receiving a user service request from an associated user over said digital communications network,

a processor adapted for automatedly selecting a matched service provider by matching said user service request with a service provider, and for determining whether said matched service provider elects to be identified to said associated user, and

a transmitter adapted for automatedly forwarding said user service request over said digital communications network to said matched service provider.

32. The automated system of claim 31 further comprising a responder adapted for automatedly identifying said matched service provider to said associated user in response to said matched service provider electing to be identified.

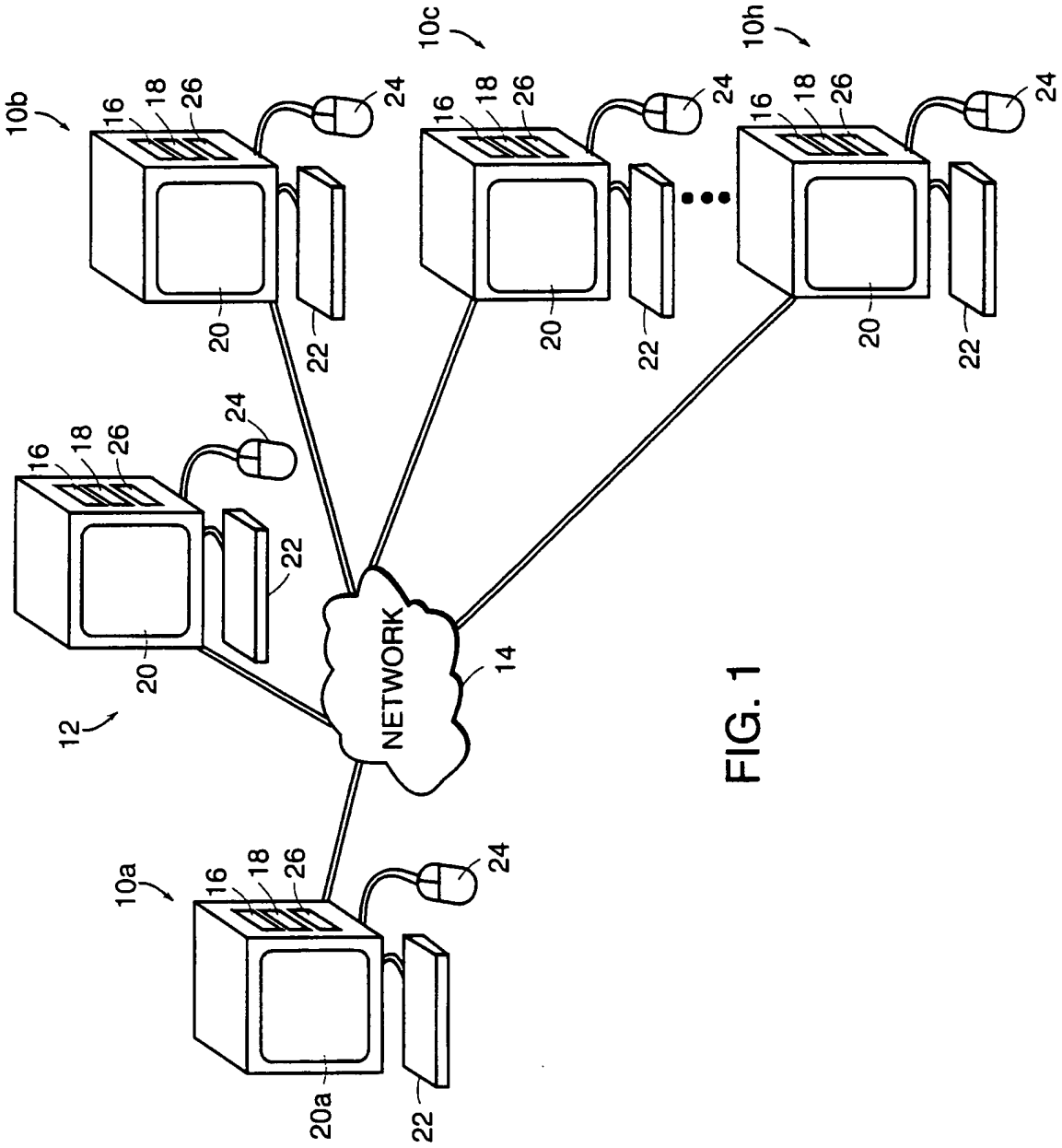


FIG. 1

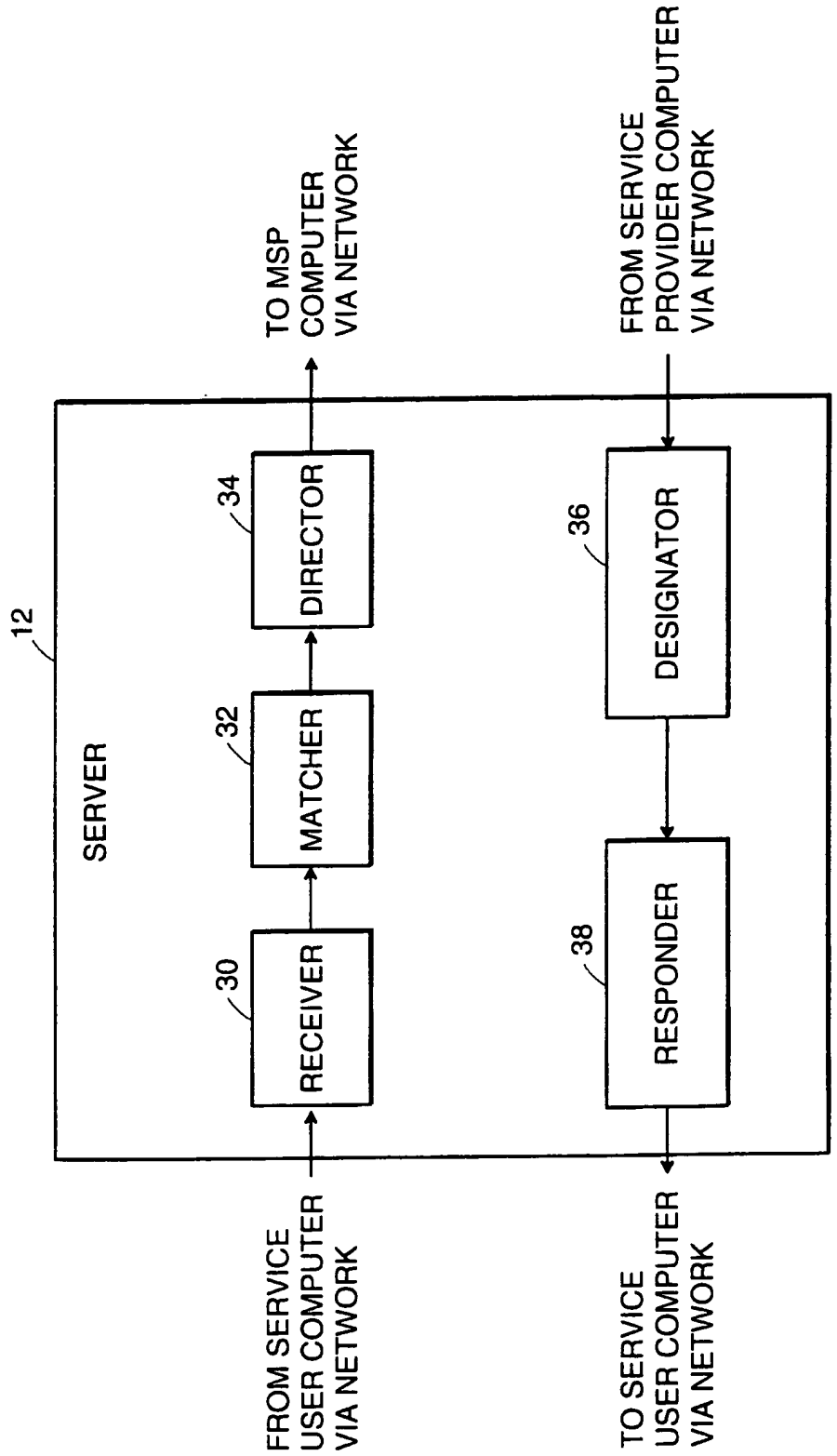

12
SERVER
30
RECEIVER
32
MATCHER
34
DIRECTOR
36
DESIGNATOR
38
RESPONDER
FROM SERVICE USER COMPUTER VIA NETWORK
TO MSP COMPUTER VIA NETWORK
FROM SERVICE PROVIDER COMPUTER VIA NETWORK
TO SERVICE USER COMPUTER VIA NETWORK

FIG. 2

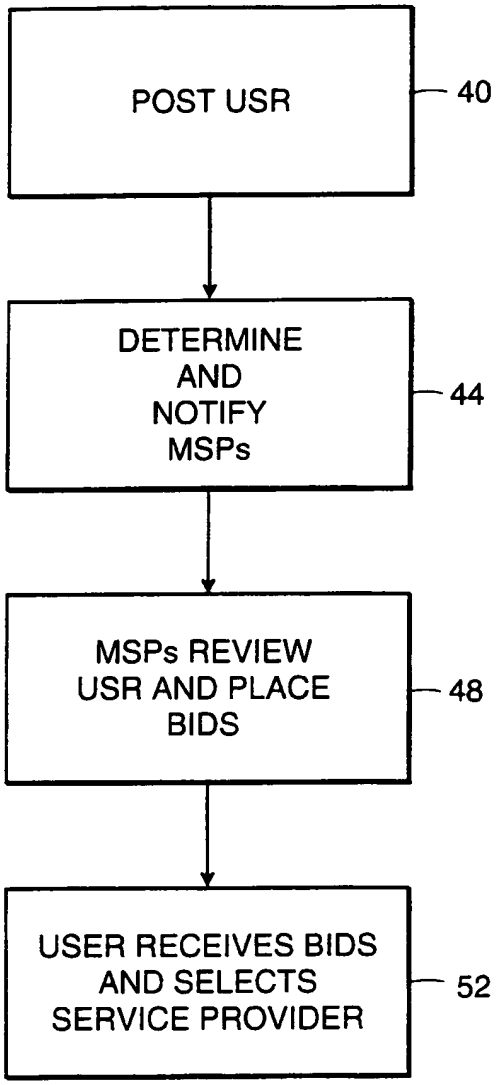

POST USR
40
DETERMINE AND NOTIFY MSPs
44
MSPs REVIEW USR AND PLACE BIDS
48
USER RECEIVES BIDS AND SELECTS SERVICE PROVIDER
52

FIG. 3

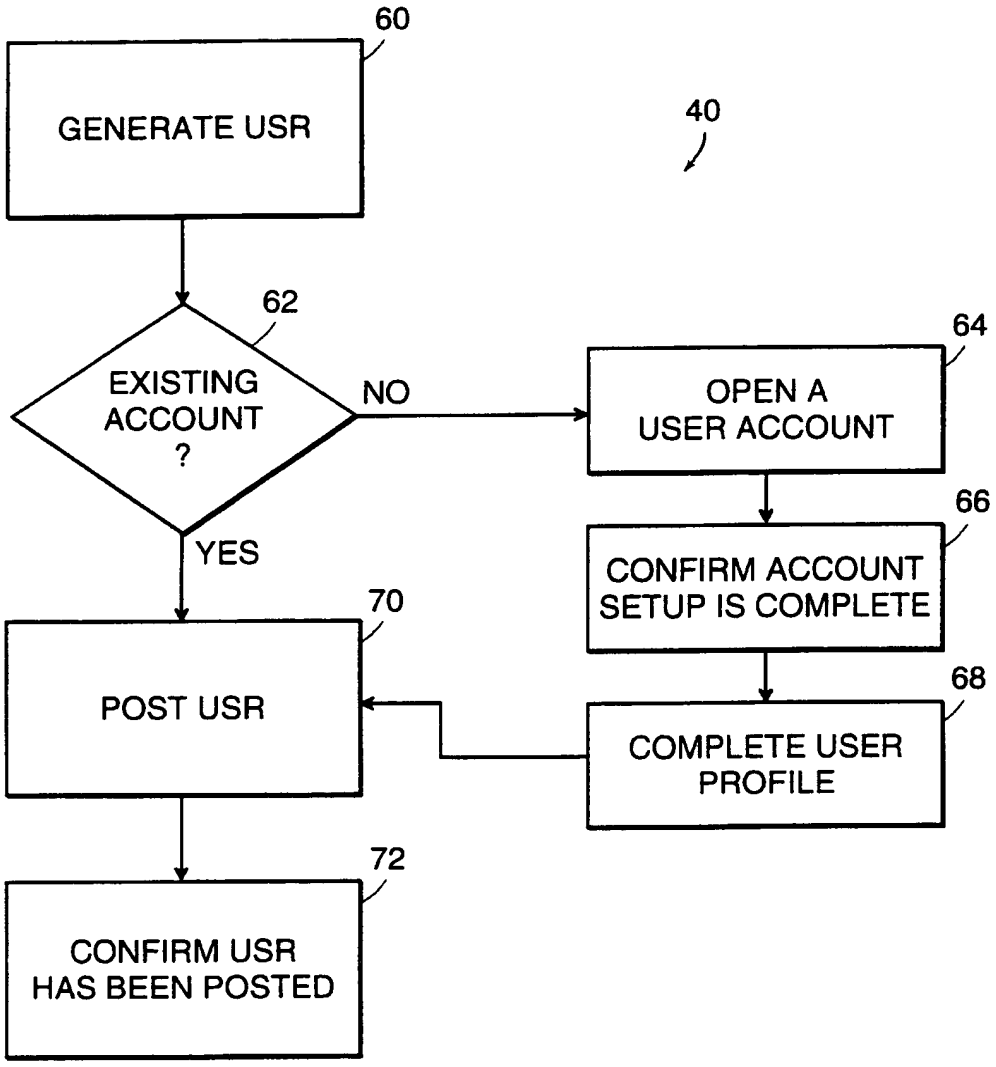

60
GENERATE USR
40
62
EXISTING ACCOUNT ?
NO
64
OPEN A USER ACCOUNT
66
CONFIRM ACCOUNT SETUP IS COMPLETE
68
COMPLETE USER PROFILE
YES
70
POST USR
72
CONFIRM USR HAS BEEN POSTED

FIG. 4

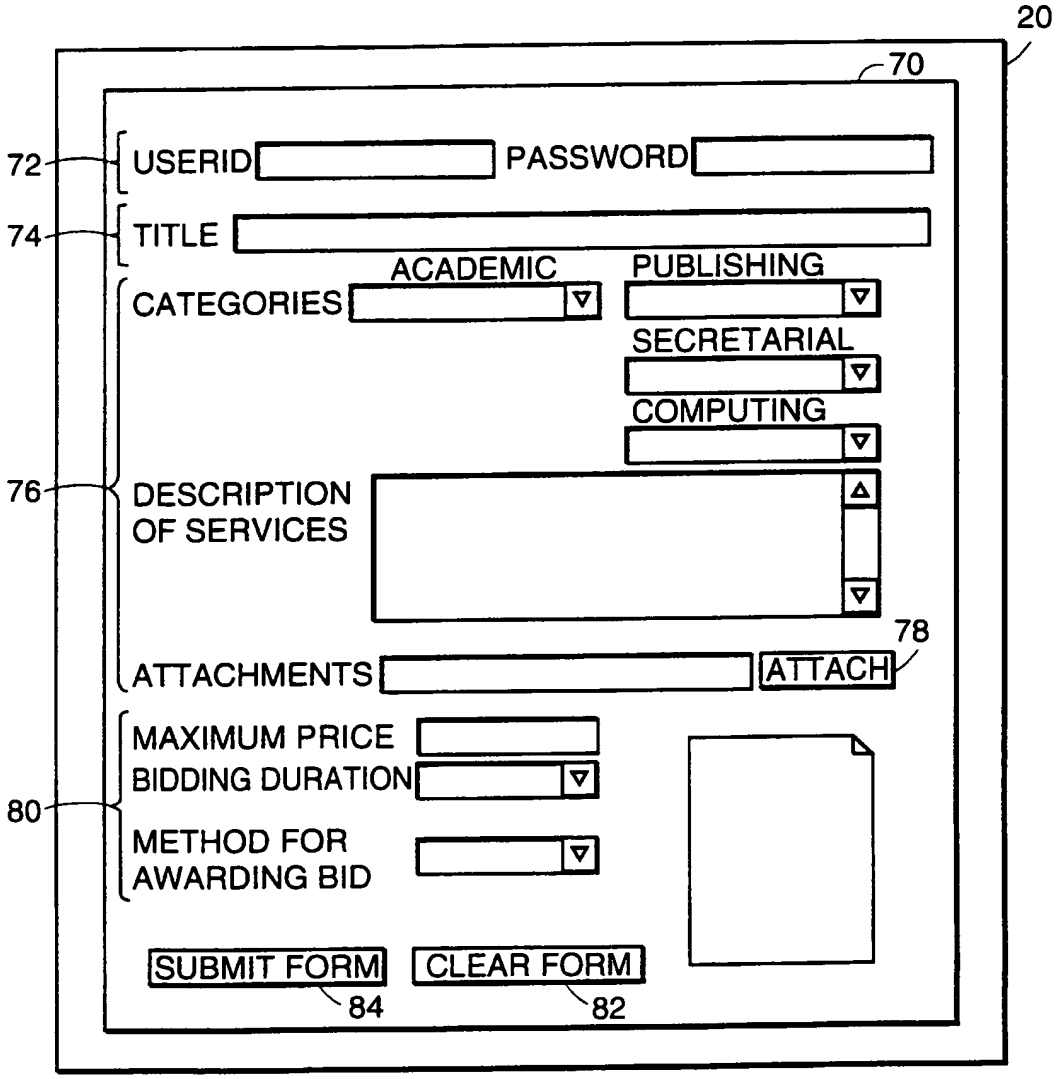

20
70
72
USERID
PASSWORD
74
TITLE
ACADEMIC
PUBLISHING
CATEGORIES
SECRETARIAL
COMPUTING
76
DESCRIPTION
OF SERVICES
78
ATTACHMENTS
ATTACH
MAXIMUM PRICE
BIDDING DURATION
80
METHOD FOR
AWARDING BID
SUBMIT FORM
CLEAR FORM
84
82

FIG. 5

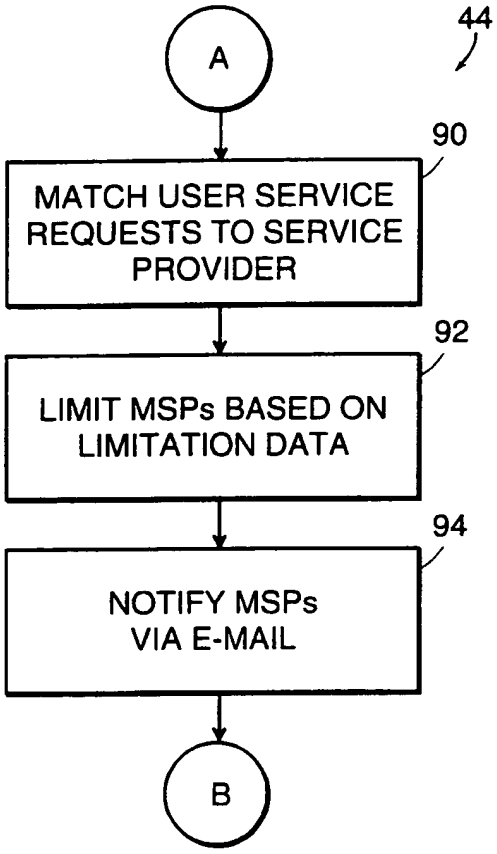

A
44
90
MATCH USER SERVICE REQUESTS TO SERVICE PROVIDER
92
LIMIT MSPs BASED ON LIMITATION DATA
94
NOTIFY MSPs VIA E-MAIL
B

FIG. 6

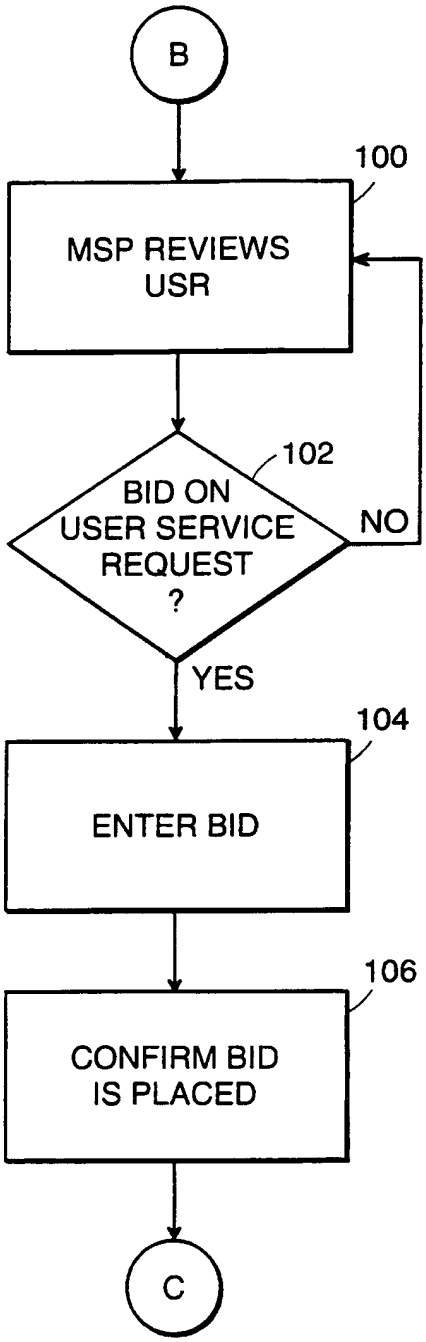

B
48
100
MSP REVIEWS USR
102
BID ON USER SERVICE REQUEST ?
NO
YES
104
ENTER BID
106
CONFIRM BID IS PLACED
C

FIG. 7

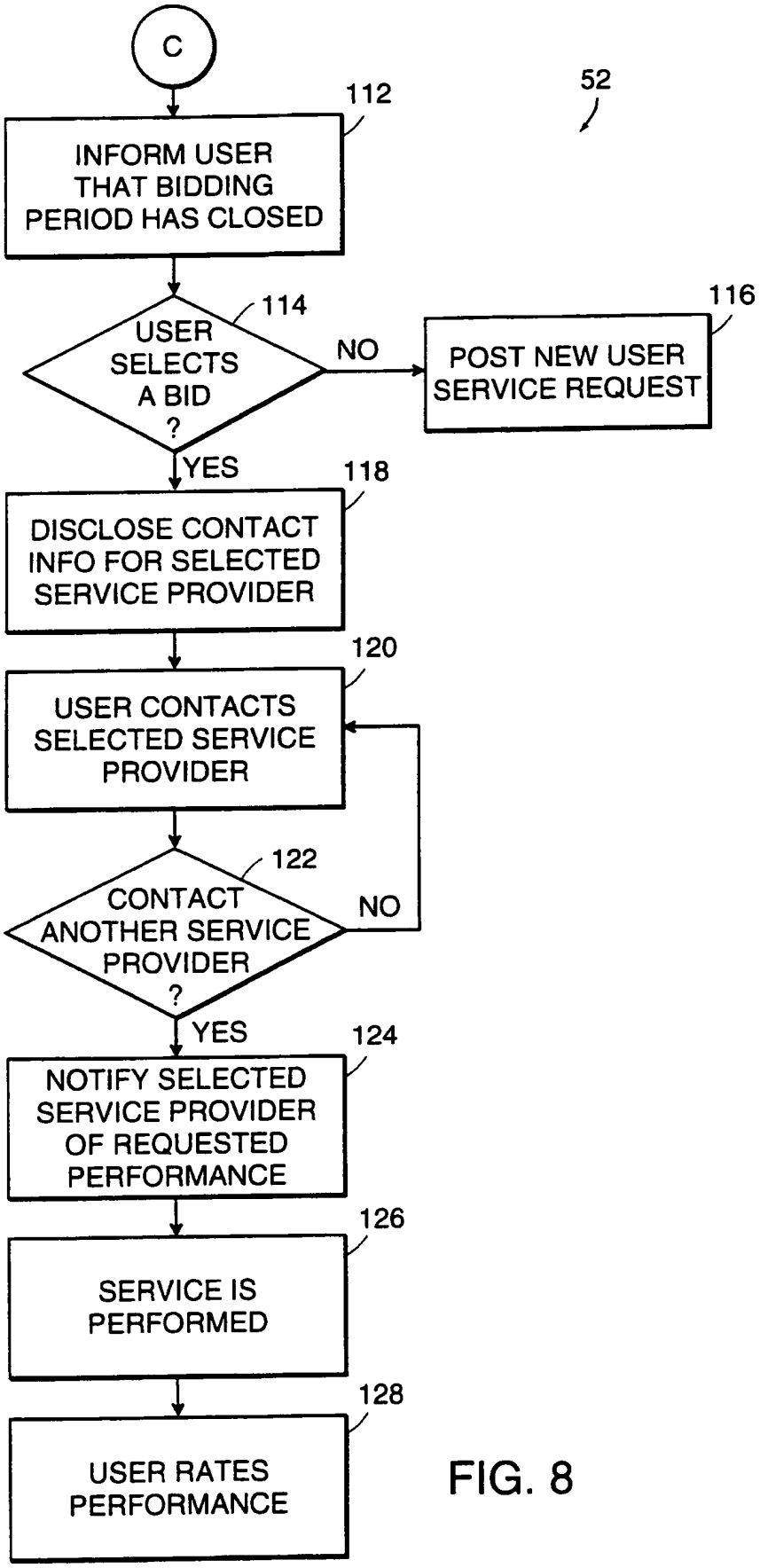
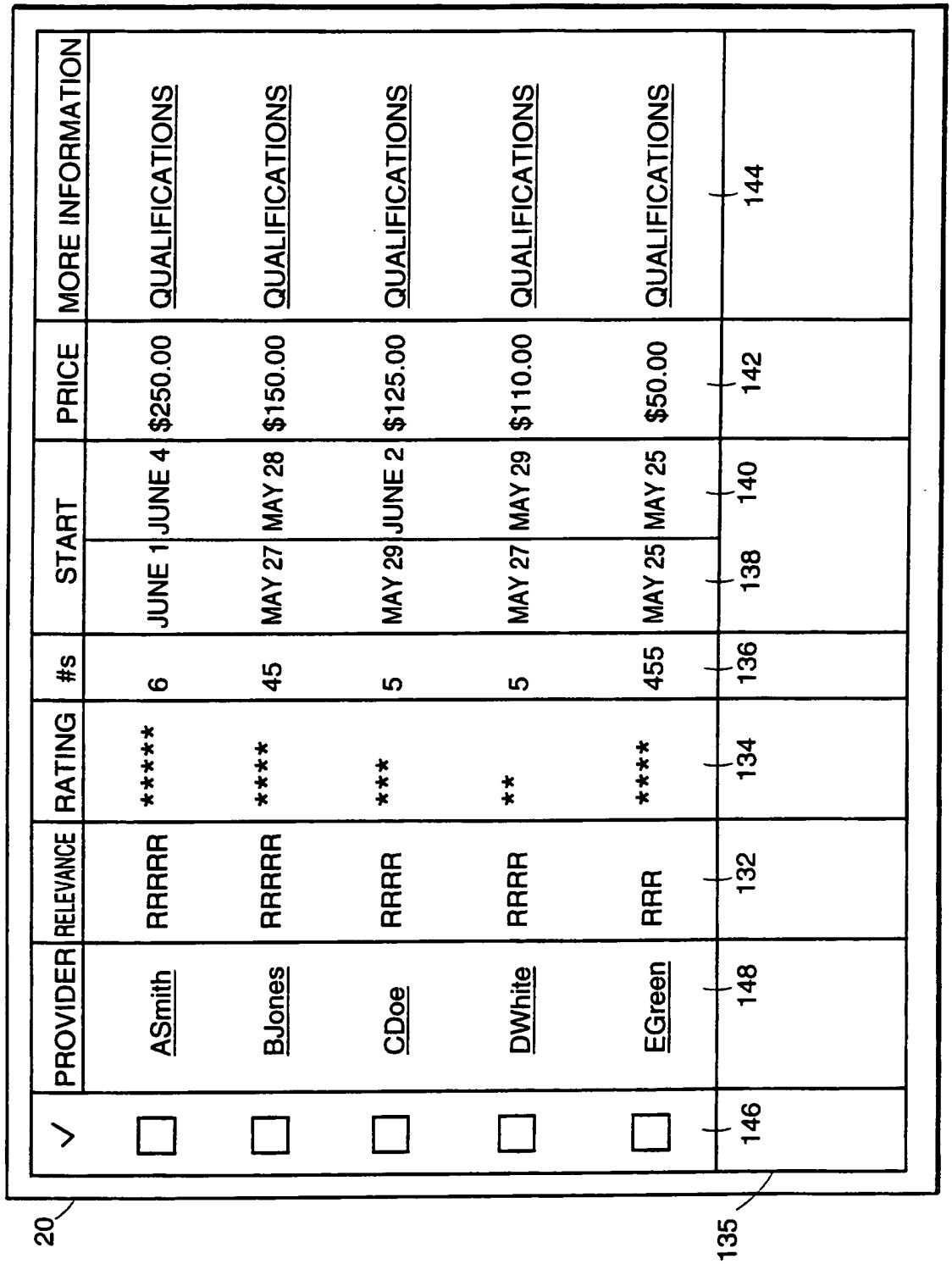

C
52
112
INFORM USER THAT BIDDING PERIOD HAS CLOSED
114
USER SELECTS A BID ?
NO
116
POST NEW USER SERVICE REQUEST
YES
118
DISCLOSE CONTACT INFO FOR SELECTED SERVICE PROVIDER
120
USER CONTACTS SELECTED SERVICE PROVIDER
122
CONTACT ANOTHER SERVICE PROVIDER ?
NO
YES
124
NOTIFY SELECTED SERVICE PROVIDER OF REQUESTED PERFORMANCE
126
SERVICE IS PERFORMED
128
USER RATES PERFORMANCE

FIG. 8

FIG. 9


20
135
✓
PROVIDER
RELEVANCE
RATING
#s
START
PRICE
MORE INFORMATION
ASmith
RRRRR
*****
6
JUNE 1
JUNE 4
$250.00
QUALIFICATIONS
BJones
RRRRR
****
45
MAY 27
MAY 28
$150.00
QUALIFICATIONS
CDoe
RRRR
***
5
MAY 29
JUNE 2
$125.00
QUALIFICATIONS
DWhite
RRRR
**
5
MAY 27
MAY 29
$110.00
QUALIFICATIONS
EGreen
RRR
****
455
MAY 25
MAY 25
$50.00
QUALIFICATIONS
146
148
132
134
136
138
140
142
144

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(54) Title: A SYSTEM FOR MATCHING A SERVICE PROVIDER WITH A SERVICE USER

(57) Abstract:

PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

PCT

DECLARATION OF NON-ESTABLISHMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

(PCT Article 17(2)(a), Rules 13ter.1(c) and Rule 39)

Applicant's or agent's file reference	IMPORTANT DECLARATION	Date of mailing *(day/month/year)*
EFI-001PC		22/06/2001
International application No.	International filing date *(day/month/year)*	(Earliest) Priority date *(day/month/year)*
PCT/US 00/ 25347	15/09/2000	24/09/1999
International Patent Classification (IPC) or both national classification and IPC	G06F17/60	
Applicant		
NEXTDOOR NETWORKS, INC.		

This International Searching Authority hereby declares, according to Article 17(2)(a), that **no international search report will be established** on the international application for the reasons indicated below

1. [X] The subject matter of the international application relates to:
   - a. [ ] scientific theories.
   - b. [ ] mathematical theories
   - c. [ ] plant varieties.
   - d. [ ] animal varieties.
   - e. [ ] essentially biological processes for the production of plants and animals, other than microbiological processes and the products of such processes.
   - f. [X] schemes, rules or methods of doing business.
   - g. [ ] schemes, rules or methods of performing purely mental acts.
   - h. [ ] schemes, rules or methods of playing games.
   - i. [ ] methods for treatment of the human body by surgery or therapy.
   - j. [ ] methods for treatment of the animal body by surgery or therapy.
   - k. [ ] diagnostic methods practised on the human or animal body.
   - l. [ ] mere presentations of information.
   - m. [ ] computer programs for which this International Searching Authority is not equipped to search prior art.

2. [ ] The failure of the following parts of the international application to comply with prescribed requirements prevents a meaningful search from being carried out:
   [ ] the description [ ] the claims [ ] the drawings

3. [ ] The failure of the nucleotide and/or amino acid sequence listing to comply with the standard provided for in Annex C of the Administrative Instructions prevents a meaningful search from being carried out:
   [ ] the written form has not been furnished or does not comply with the standard.
   [ ] the computer readable form has not been furnished or does not comply with the standard.

4. Further comments:

Name and mailing address of the International Searching Authority	Authorized officer
European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL-2280 HV Rijswijk Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Tx. 31 651 epo nl, Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016	Mar'a Rodr'guez Nõvoa

Form PCT/ISA/203 (July 1998)

FURTHER INFORMATION CONTINUED FROM PCT/ISA/ 203

The subject-matter claimed in claims 1-22 falls under the provisions of Article 17(2)(a)(i) and Rule 39.1(iii), PCT, such subject-matter relating to a method of doing business.

Claims 23-32 relate to a conventional system for performing the business method of claims 1-22. Although these claims do not literally belong to the method category, they essentially claim protection for the same commercial effect as the method claims. The International Searching Authority considers that searching this subject-matter would serve no useful purpose. It is not at present apparent how the subject-matter of the present claims may be considered defensible in any subsequent examination phase in front of the EPO as International Preliminary Examining Authority with regard to the provisions of Article 33(1) PCT (novelty, inventive step); see also Guidelines B-VII, 1-6).

The applicant's attention is drawn to the fact that claims relating to inventions in respect of which no international search report has been established need not be the subject of an international preliminary examination (Rule 66.1(e) PCT). The applicant is advised that the EPO policy when acting as an International Preliminary Examining Authority is normally not to carry out a preliminary examination on matter which has not been searched. This is the case irrespective of whether or not the claims are amended following receipt of the search report or during any Chapter II procedure. If the application proceeds into the regional phase before the EPO, the applicant is reminded that a search may be carried out during examination before the EPO (see EPO Guideline C-VI, 8.5), should the problems which led to the Article 17(2) declaration be overcome.